

HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 5: The Early Daoists – Hermits, Shen Dao, and Laozi

Section 3: Great Dao paradoxes: Incoherence

- ‘Abandon knowledge’ generates a “prescriptive” paradox
- In ancient China, the object of ‘knowing’ was *dào*, i.e., knowing *how* or knowing *to*...
 - Modern Chinese compound for *knowledge* is 知道 *zhī dào*, “knowing *dào*”
- ‘Knowing’ in classical teachings is knowing some way or guide. ‘Abandon yourself’ is a prescriptive corollary (abandon ‘self’ as a guiding way follows from ‘abandon know-how’)
 - Leaves us with a contradiction: ‘abandon knowing’ is a prescription; if I follow it, I disobey it
 - A “prescriptive” paradox: to obey the advice is to ignore it; to ignore it is to obey it
 - Prescriptive paradoxes are more common than semantic paradoxes in classical China
- Earlier criticism (this is a *dào* that doesn’t *dào*) of its empty guidance PLUS the new criticism that it is self-defeating guidance – This is a way to understand the *Zhuangzi*’s criticism of Shen Dao
- A) Not a *dào* because it doesn’t *dào*, and B) What it *dào*s is to ignore what it *dào*s.